

“The Dearest Place on Earth”

Experiencing the Beauty and Glory of the Church

The Eternal Wisdom of God: The Church is Not an Afterthought

Ephesians 3:1-13

Intro: “The Dearest Place on Earth”

“Give yourself to the Church. You that are members of the Church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I had found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth... All who have first given themselves to the Lord, should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord’s people. How else is there to be a Church on the earth? If it is right for anyone to refrain from membership in the Church, it is right for everyone, and then the testimony for God would be lost to the world! As I have already said, the Church is faulty, but that is no excuse for your

not joining it, if you are the Lord's. Nor need your own faults keep you back, for the Church is not an institution for perfect people, but a sanctuary for sinners saved by Grace, who, though they are saved, are still sinners and need all the help they can derive from the sympathy and guidance of their fellow Believers. The Church is the nursery for God's weak children where they are nourished and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep—the home for Christ's family.”

(Charles Spurgeon, “The Best Donation,” (No. 2234) an exposition of 2 Corinthians 8:5 delivered on April 5, 1891 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England.)

Those are not my words. I wish they were. I wish I could preach like that! Those are words from a sermon preached by Charles Spurgeon in the church. Did you hear what he called the church? “The dearest place on earth.”

We're taking a break from our steady diet through the book of Romans to do a sermon series with that title: *“The Dearest Place on Earth: Experiencing the Beauty and Glory of the Church.”* For so many Christians that view of the church is totally foreign. For some, the church is more of an afterthought—a take-it-or-leave-it tack-on to the Christian life. For others, the

church reminds them of how badly they've been hurt or burned or betrayed. And for some, sadly, that is a true experience—they WERE wrongly hurt and burned and betrayed. And yet there are still others who merely FEEL like they were burned and betrayed but the reality is they just didn't like how things were done—like, they were confronted in their sin.

There is a wide-range of feelings toward the church by so many Christians. So I want us to revisit, from Scripture, what God says about the church. But I don't want us to just talk about it in route terms, like, "Here are three reasons why you should become a member of a church." Or "Here's what the Bible tells us to do on Sundays: sing, pray, read Scripture, preach, baptize, take the Lord's Supper. So do that!" There is a place for that kind of route instruction. But that's not the aim of this sermon series.

I don't want to give us route instruction on what the church is and what it does. I want us to see how GLORIOUS it is! I want us to see how amazing it is to be a member of a gospel church—even though it's hard. I want us to catch

a glimpse of how glorious it is to gather for worship TOGETHER on Sundays—even when it's more convenient not to. I want us to behold the beauty of the church. So here's where we're going. [SHOW ON THE SCREEN]

1. *The Eternal Wisdom of God: The Church is NOT an Afterthought* (Ephesians 3:1-13)
2. *The Beautified Bride of Christ: The Church from Perspective of Her Groom* (Ephesians 5:25-33)
3. *The Beauty of Belonging: Church Membership* (1 Corinthians 12:12-26)
4. *The Advantage in Authority: Congregationalism* (Matthew 18:15-20)
5. *The Glory of Gathering: Corporate Worship* (Hebrews 10:24-25)
6. *The Mission of Multiplying: Evangelism, Discipleship, and Church Planting to the Ends of the Earth* (Matthew 28:16-20)

The Eternal Plan of God

So I want to begin this series by giving the big picture—the REALLY big picture of the church, so that you'll come to see how absolutely unthinkable it would be to abandon the church,

or treat the church as an optional part of the Christian life—take it or leave it.

This series is about how the local church displays the glory of Jesus Christ. Put differently, the church puts on display the eternal wisdom of God. That's what Ephesians 3:1-13 is about. *God's eternal wisdom is revealed in the gospel and displayed in the church.* So let's consider first how God's eternal wisdom is...

Revealed in the Gospel [v1]

After giving a long explanation in chapter 2 of the reality that Jew and Gentile believers are now one new man in Christ—they are one people...Paul says in 3:1, "For THIS reason I'm a prisoner *on behalf of the Gentiles*," and then he stops mid-thought, and takes that phrase "a prison for the Gentiles" and presses into it. So this whole passage is basically one long parenthesis on that phrase in v1.

We know that because it's obvious that he picks back up his thoughts in [v14]. And he goes onto talk about what he's praying for the church in light of the fact that Gentiles are included. Know

how Gentiles are? Non-Jews! It's basically all the nations in the world except for Israel—which includes the vast majority of us.

What's up with that? Why would Paul cut off his thought in v1, and spend 13 verses pressing deeper into this idea that Gentiles are included into the people of God? He just cannot pass up the opportunity to explain why it is so worth it that he's in prison on behalf of the Gentiles. He's in prison FOR THEM. **[v13]**

He is suffering in prison for Gentiles, and it's for their glory. What does that mean? He thinks it's worth it for him to be rotting in prison because he got thrown in prison for something that is for the benefit/glory of Gentiles. What's going on? **[v2]** GENTILES! He's talking to the Gentiles in the church at Ephesus. **[v3]**

So there's some revelation that Paul received from God himself that was meant to be a stewardship of God's grace toward the Gentiles. Some divine message/knowledge shown to Paul that would mean some kind of benefit for the Gentiles. What is it? **[v4]**

Ok, so he's used that word "mystery" twice now. But here he calls it "the mystery of Christ." What does he mean by that? Some mystery pertaining to Christ, the Messiah. Is it like a mystery novel where we have to put together some clues to solve a puzzle? It can't be that because it was a "mystery" that we *revealed* TO him, not something he figured out on his own. The word "mystery" was a technical word that meant: "that which was previously hidden or unclear, that has NOW been made known/revealed." You can hear the definition in [v5].

Not known to the "sons of men in other generations"... who's that? No doubt, that's talking about OT Israel. But now, this mystery has been revealed to whom? "Apostles and Prophets." Who's that? That's talking about the leaders of the NT/NC people of God. This "mystery of Christ" was unknown to the saints in the OT but has now been revealed to those in the New.

Some mystery of mystery pertains to "Christ, the Messiah." Who's the Messiah? According to OT anticipation, who is the Messiah? He's the one

who was promised from long ago to save his people Israel and be their King and rule and reign forever. So there's something about this Jewish Messiah/Christ/Savior that was previously unknown but has now been disclosed by God to Paul and the NT apostles. What is it? **[v6]**

That is one of the most glorious statements ever written. Know why? Because probably none of us in here would have any hope of salvation apart from that truth laid out in v6. It is an astonishing statement that we often fail to feel the magnitude of, because we don't get how unique and even scandalous this would've sounded to the original hearers.

The Messiah was promised for the nation of Israel. And the Messiah was supposed to come and JUDGE the Gentile nations, not SAVE them and FORGIVE them of their sins...and CERTAINLY NOT incorporate them INTO the people of God! That wasn't expected.

Sure, there would be *some* Gentiles who experienced the blessings of salvation through the Messiah, like Ruth and Rahab. But Gentiles

en masse believing in and following the Jewish Messiah and being saved and being brought into one new people of God called “the church”???
NO WAY! That’s crazy!

And that’s exactly what Paul is getting at. Notice the strong language he uses to describe Gentile inclusion. [v6]

Each of those words in the original language includes the prefix “with/together.” They are heirs, members, partakers TOGETHER WITH...whom? The people of God. That’s why it’s translated...

Fellow heirs. This word is a reference to some sort of gift of inheritance—They are heirs...of what? No doubt, he has in mind the promise of an inheritance that runs all throughout the OT, first given to Abraham. The promise of being God’s treasured possession, being a great people of a multitude that cannot be numbered, inheriting a land that gives them rest forever. The mystery—the staggering reality—that has now been revealed is that Gentiles who trust in the Messiah do not merely receive some sort of

blessing FROM God's people by extension, rather they are fellow heirs of the inheritance promised to God's people!

Moreover, they are ***members of the same body***. Believing Jews and believing Gentiles are not two separate peoples of God. They are one. I want you to see this **[Eph. 2:11-16]**

There used to be a lot of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Not anymore, if they're trusting in Christ. Why? Because they are one body/people!

Lastly, Paul says in v6 that Gentiles are ***"partakers of the promise."*** Which means, all the promises God ever gave to his OC people Israel are for all who are in Christ, whether you're Jew and Gentile. Here's how Paul puts it in Galatians 3:28-29, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."*

Let me put it very simply: When it comes to being right with God and inheriting the promise

of salvation, your cultural background, ethnic heritage, your gender, your age, your socioeconomic status is of NO HINDRANCE to being part of the people of God. Why? Because it's not your cultural background or ethnic identity or gender or age or how much money you have that brings you into God's family! What does? **[3:6, "through the gospel"]**

We get into the people of God and are part of his family called the church through the gospel. And what he means is: through FAITH in the gospel. **[GOSPEL]** THE mystery of Gentile inclusion is revealed in THAT gospel.

But where is it displayed? How is the mystery seen? How is it visualized? You can hear about God saving both Jew and Gentile through Christ, and you can have some sort of vague concept that they are "one," but if it is not SEEN—with our eyes, actually visualized—then what power does it have? And that's where Paul goes next. The mystery is...

Displayed in the Church [v7]

So what is the grace that was given for him to minister? What kind of ministry did Paul receive as a gift of God's grace? **[v8]**

That's the grace that was given him to do. He sees it as a gift—an absolute privilege. And therefore, why he believes it worth it for him to be in jail because of it. What is he preaching? He calls it “the unsearchable riches” of Christ. This is an amazing way of describing the good news of the gospel: “unsearchable riches.” It's a wealth that cannot be counted. What I just described about what Jesus did for sinners like us, can be called “unsearchable riches.” Notice how he elaborates on this gift of grace of preaching the gospel to Gentiles. **[v9]**

So as Paul preaches the gospel to everyone, including Gentiles, and when they believe and get saved, the plan of God that was once hidden is now brought to light. God's plan of Gentile inclusion into the people of God is now seen as more and more Gentiles get saved. WHERE is it seen? **[v10]**

Do you realize his point? The CHURCH puts on display God's mysterious and glorious plan! And Paul calls that plan "the manifold wisdom of God." The church is the theater that shows off the wisdom of God. The mystery of full Gentile inclusion, that shows off the unsearchable riches of Christ, is seen most visibly in the church!

Do you see why Paul calls the gospel the "unsearchable riches of Christ"? The wealth of God's grace in salvation is so vast that it is not restricted to one people group. It is for ALL people! The lavishness of God's grace in Christ is put on full display in the church. How?

Listen, this passage would make absolutely no sense if Paul only had in mind some vague concept of the universal church (all Christians everywhere). Verse 10 would make no sense without a right understanding of the realized manifestation of the universal church in actual local churches.

Do you see why? When *real* people who are *really* different from one another—Jew and Gentile, different backgrounds, cultures,

ethnicities... and we could add: age, gender, socioeconomic status, personality... When such different people come together in ONE body called the church, Paul says, “The manifold wisdom of God is on full display.”

A gathering of individuals into an interconnectedness with one another that transcends but does not diminish cultural, ethnic, economic, generational differences... that one person shows off the glorious wisdom of God like nothing else on earth. How? I think we get a clue when we consider to WHOM the wisdom of God is on display. **[v10]**

Who’s that? If we just flip over a few chapters in Ephesians, we understand who these “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” are. **[6:11-12]**

You understand Paul’s point in 3:10. To whom is the manifold wisdom of God put on display through the church? Satan and his demonic hosts. HOW?? Think about it! When Satan and the demonic realm look at the church, what do they see? They see their defeat! They see that God’s grace cannot be stopped! They see that

the work of Christ extends to every tongue, nation, and language. They see the utter wisdom of a holy and gracious God because they see people who, left to themselves, wouldn't want to have anything to do with each other, but through Christ, they are ONE. That's how the church displays the wisdom of God. And it is glorious. Let me give a few tangible examples...

First, a generational example. *One of the things that people observe about Kinney is its generational diversity. We don't have only young people. And we don't have only old people. We have all kinds of ages, and it's beautiful. Know why? Lemme paint a few pictures: A young lady in our church, married just a few years, told me the other day, "I want you to know how much of a blessing my discipleship group is." [Explain D-group]*

I asked her to remind me who was in it. She said there are four ladies: Her (a twenty-something newlywed w/no kids), another twenty-something newly-ish-wed w/no kids, a middle-age with several kids, another middle age with adult kids, and an elderly lady with adult kids and

grandkids. That's a diverse group! And this young lady said it's the highlight of her week to connect with these other ladies for prayer and life-talk.

That's not normal! What would be normal would be to say, "I'm only gonna connect with people who are just like me because I don't have anything in common with people who are not in my exact stage in life!" Ummm...CHRIST? You have so much more in common with a member of this church who is in an entirely different stage of life than you, than you do with a non-Christian neighbor who's in the exact same life stage.

In our community group a few weeks ago [explain CG], an elderly gentleman shared a very heartfelt prayer request for his adult children who have walked away from the Lord. It's obvious that this eats away at him (as it would any Christian parent, no matter how old your kids are!).

Well, do you know who prayed for him and his adult children? A 12-yr-old member of our church. It was one of the most beautiful things I've ever witnessed to hear the heartfelt, sincere,

earnest prayer of a 12-year-old for a 78-year-old's adult children's salvation.

Listen, that's not just cute. That's glorious! Where else do we see the wisdom of God on display in that way but in the church?

One other example: ethnic/cultural (which is very similar to the point Paul is making in Ephesians 3). Something very fascinating I noticed a few months ago. Every one of the engaged couples in the church was an interracial couple. Clearly, they're copying me and my wife!

But it was a display of the wisdom of God, especially because interracial marriage has been legal only since 1967! There's something glorious about seeing the fruit of the gospel in bringing people from different ethnic backgrounds together that displays God's wisdom, and when it happens in the church, it shows, ethnicity is not a barrier to even the most intimate relationship in the world.

Or, think about our worship gathering. I wonder if you get as much joy as I do in seeing our

brother from Jamaica raising his hands in worship and praising God with fist pumps in the air....standing near a white American who's feeling the rhythm of the singing and bouncing back and forth...

Or hearing a Taiwanese brother "Amen-ing" his heart out, and hearing a Hispanic sister feeding off him, and talking through the whole sermon with verbal affirmations. Or just seeing a black brother not saying a word during the sermon, but engaging so intensely, but with a quiet demeanor...sitting next to white brother who simply cannot keep quiet but has to affirm nearly every Word of the sermon as it is proclaimed...

We are so different! And yet we all love the same Christ, because it is he who brought us together into ONE body. Of course, this can't always be the case in every local church—like, churches in the deep jungles of Africa probably are not going to have great ethnic diversity. But in Austin, TX, where people from all over the world live, this kind of diversity is quite apparent.

Let me give an implication of this point. There are two unbiblical extremes we can go to when reflecting on ethnic diversity in the church. On one extreme elevates our ethnic identities to such a degree we make them more important than what they are. And the church begins to divide over ethnic differences. That's a mistake and not an accurate picture of the vision in Ephesians 3.

But there's another extreme that we need to avoid that I think is often a reaction to the first extreme, namely when we minimize our cultural and ethnic differences in such a way that we deem the unimportant all together. Sometimes it's referred to as "color-blindness." That can be a good thing, if what we mean by it is: "I'm not going to judge a person based on the color of their skin but on the content of their character." OR "I'm not viewing that church member *first and foremost* through the lens of their ethnic identity, but through the lens of the fact that they're a Christian...a brother/sister." That's good! And that's biblical!

BUT, if we take this idea of “color blindness” to such a degree that we begin to deem all cultural and ethnic differences as entirely UN-important, I think we’re missing the point of Ephesians 3. They are *hugely* important. Know why? Because such differences actually hold up and highlight the most important thing about us! Which is not our differences, but what we have in common: CHRIST! The fact that the members of this church, who are so different in so many ways, are not only friends, but deeper than that, we’re brothers and sisters, we’re family...does that not show off the manifold wisdom of God in the gospel displayed through the church—that we’ve all been redeemed by the same Christ?

Our differences are meant to show off THAT. And when our differences begin to DETRACT from that—either by maximizing our differences OR by minimizing them—we’re missing out on experiencing the beauty of the church. And this diverse design of God was not an afterthought.
[vv11-12]

We all have this access to God through faith—Jew and Gentile. And did you hear what

Paul calls this diverse design in v11? “The eternal purpose” of God. The church is NOT an afterthought. It is not even a parenthesis in God’s overarching plan for the nation of Israel. Don’t ever think of the church as a parenthetical part of God’s plan. It is INTEGRAL! It was his plan from the beginning—from eternity past to have Jew AND GENTILE *together* in one body where Christ, the Messiah is their head and God’s wisdom is put on full display.

Conclusion

Do you realize that showing up on Sundays is no trivial matter? Do you see how the manifold wisdom of God cannot be put on display unless God’s people are actually together? Unless there are actual physical, local churches? When you come to church, you’re not just coming to consume; you’re coming to display.

“Give yourself to the Church,” said Charles Spurgeon. “...imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth...” (Charles Spurgeon, “The Best Donation,” (No. 2234) an exposition of 2 Corinthians 8:5 delivered on April 5, 1891 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, England.)

My prayer is that we really come to believe that, and therefore, glory in the beauty of the church.